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Mary Magdalene

The woman the world can never forget

Robert J. Wieland

This story in the Gospel of Mark is so striking that it charms everyone willing to listen. Like a precious jewel displayed in an ugly pot, it is set between two of the worst stories ever written - the one about the Jewish leaders' crucifixion of Christ, and the one about Judas Iscariot's betrayal of Him.

In the middle is this woman so badly twisted out of shape by sexual exploitation that the Bible says "seven devils" had gotten control of her. The four Gospels furnish a surprisingly complex knowledge of who she was and why she did her outlandish deed. Yet Jesus has enjoined upon us the duty of telling this story of Mary Magdalene

"WHERESOEVER THIS GOSPEL SHALL BE PREACHED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE WORLD."

This book has to be a partial fulfillment of His command!

Printed in Australia by
Maranatha Media

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Layout and Design
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Foreword

This strange lady holds a legendary place in the Bible story. With the possible exception of the mother of Jesus, more has been written about her than about any other lady.

Mary Magdalene captures the imagination of almost everybody who hears about her mysterious and exotic act of anointing Jesus' feet with "precious ointment," and then washing them with her tears – the only one such act ever recorded in human history.

Perhaps the most monumental work in print about Mary is Susan Haskins' *Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor* (Harcourt and Brace, 1993). It's a whopping 518 scholarly pages, heavily endnoted and indexed. It explores the non-canonical "gospels" and the writings of Church Fathers and scholars all through the centuries and religious art. Its basic message: the mystery only deepens the further one digs in non-biblical literature and art.

Our modest essay is concerned only with what comes to light in the four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But when context is consulted in each, a surprisingly detailed portrait of this lady emerges.

There has to be a reason why Jesus bespoke for her act the special attention of everybody in the world wherever "this gospel" is to be proclaimed. Let's explore the story:

> "In only two days the eight-day Festival of Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread would begin. The high priests and religion scholars were looking for a way they could seize Jesus by stealth and kill Him. They agreed that it should not be done during Passover Week. 'We don't want the crowds up in arms,' they said.
>
> "Jesus was at Bethany, a guest of Simon the Leper. While He was eating dinner, a woman came up carrying a bottle of very expensive perfume. Opening the bottle, she poured it on His head. Some of the guests became furious among themselves.
>
> "'That's criminal! A sheer waste. This perfume could have been sold for well over a year's wages and handed out to the poor.'

They swelled up in anger, nearly bursting with indignation over her.

"But Jesus said, 'Let her alone. Why are you giving her a hard time? She has just done something wonderfully significant for Me. You will have the poor with you every day for the rest of your lives. Whenever you feel like it, you can do something for them. Not so with Me. She did what she could when she could – she pre-anointed My body for burial. And you can be sure that wherever in the whole world the Message is preached, what she just did is going to be talked about admiringly.'

"Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the cabal of high priests, determined to betray Him. They couldn't believe their ears, and promised to pay him well. He started looking for just the right moment to hand Him over" (Mark 14:1-11, *The Message*).

Why Do We Write about Mary Magdalene?

Why should Jesus say that the story of one bad sinner must be told everywhere?

1. As a photographic print resembles its negative, so her strange act resembled His great sacrifice. Jesus had to defend her, for in doing so He was defending Himself, His cross.
2. She had paid an enormous price for that alabaster flask of precious ointment (300 silver coins, the wage of a working man for a year). Jesus paid an enormous price to redeem us.
3. What Mary did was wildly extravagant – "wasting" an entire flask of "very precious" ointment when only a teaspoonful was needed; so what Jesus did was equally (more so!) extravagant – shedding His blood sufficient to save an entire world when only a handful of people will respond.
4. Mary's motive was totally non-selfish; she had no thought of being praised. All she wanted to do was say, "Thank you, Lord, for saving my soul!" So Jesus' motive was purely and simply love for lost people, no acquisitive purpose mixed in to becloud that pure flame of devotion for us. Mary was unconsciously reflecting the motives of Jesus. Her perceptions, her discernment, were more sensitive than that of any of the twelve disciples.
5. The Bible singles her out as a "sinner," meaning an outstanding one (see Luke 7:37); she was "forgiven much," not little. She knew it, realized it; therefore, her now-converted sinful heart could be stretched outsize to "love much" (Luke 7:47). Hence, her amazing deed was the most beautiful ever performed by any repentant sinner in history.
6. Jesus, therefore, saw in her an example, a "prototype," a demonstration, of what His *agape*-love could and would eventually produce in "144,000" people.
7. Her act of love in no way contributed to her salvation; it was only an expression of gratitude for her salvation *already accomplished*.

Thus Jesus defined the clearest demonstration of what the word *faith* means: "Go in peace," He said. "Your faith has saved you" (Luke 7:50, KJV). Jesus nailed down, for all time to come, a clear definition of faith: a heart-

appreciation of what He has done for us in saving us from hell itself. When faith is so understood, it can do nothing else than “work” (see Galatians 5:6).

Chapter 1: Meet an Unusual Lady

What can "the truth of the gospel" do for one whose life has become a tragic ruin?

Here's a basket-case woman badly twisted out of shape by sexual exploitation. Its ruinous after-effects were so bad that the Bible says "seven devils" had control of her (Mark 5:2,8,9,15; 16:9). Let's review the story in our familiar, more literal version:

> "And being in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, as He sat at the table, a woman came having an alabaster flask of very costly oil of spikenard. And she broke the flask, and poured it on His head.
>
> "But there were some who were indignant among themselves, and said, 'Why was this fragrant oil wasted? For it might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii[1] and given to the poor.' And they criticized her sharply.
>
> "But Jesus said, 'Let her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a good work for Me. For you have the poor with you always, and whenever you wish you may do them good; but Me you do not have always.'
>
> "'She has done what she could. She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial. Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the whole world, what this woman did will also be spoken as a memorial to her'" (Mark 14:3-9, NKJV).

Mark doesn't identify this woman, but he uses a literary device that points us to the lady who is called Mary Magdalene in Mark 15:40, 47, and Mark 16:1, 9. Matthew tells the story much like Mark does, but likewise he does not identify the heroine (Matthew 26:6-13). But John identifies her clearly (John 12:2-9).

[1] A *denarius* was a Greek coin equivalent in value to a workingman's wage for a day (Matthew 20:2). Three hundred would be about a year's wages.

She is either a brilliant person who is right on, or she turns out to be a wild fanatic. Those "three hundred denarii" (silver coins) are a fantastic sum which she blew in just a few moments of aromatic bliss at this party. At first thought, it would seem that the "some" who didn't like what she did were thinking clearly. Jerusalem and its suburbs were full of poor people who could have used the food or clothing that this princely sum could have purchased for them.

But Jesus saves her from a fanatic's ignominy. He transforms her into a famous lady: never did He speak so highly of any other contemporary person! How could you ask for a higher endorsement under Heaven? This modest book has come into existence as a tiny fruition of that encomium by Jesus – her story must be proclaimed "throughout the whole world." In fact, the sobering truth dawns on us that maybe we can't really understand "this gospel" unless we hear and appreciate what the Bible says about this lady!

There's something in the story that strikes long dormant chords of music in our souls. We may preach all about the many "doctrines" that we have been pleased to speak of as "the present truth," but if we omit this story, we have deprived our listeners of essential truth that people in these last days are hungering to understand.

Jesus intended that her story be a part of the proclamation of "the everlasting gospel" for the world. Not until our "time of the end" has it even been possible that it *could* be told "throughout the whole world," as He said. Heart-warming truth in this story will yet penetrate the age-old barriers of soul set up in the hearts of Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, pagans, hard-hearted secularists, lukewarm Christians, all men. We may discover the reason why our message hasn't yet gripped the consciousness of the "worldly" world we have yet to reach.

Convincing the intellect with PowerPoint® doctrines is great; but unless the heart has been reached, our efforts are in vain. Isaiah speaks of how the Father hid His Son Jesus as a secret weapon, a "polished" arrow in "His quiver," to penetrate to the world's heart. In Mary's quiver is the evangelism arrow that will make its way into now hard-to-reach hearts around the world.

What Jesus said seems clear: we must employ her to help us reach the heart. But unless our own heart has been melted, how can we do it?

John supplies another important detail that Mark omits

He spills the beans on the surprising identity of who those "some" were who condemned Mary's prodigal offering of "very precious" ointment (John 12:1-8).

To the eternal embarrassment, the critics turn out to be *the twelve apostles*! Only a few days before Calvary, here they are with no better understanding than to join in condemning what turns out to be the most beautiful deed ever performed by a repentant sinner, something that illuminates what happened on the cross.

Then the apostle John reveals an even more embarrassing detail. Besides confirming that the otherwise unnamed heroine was Mary Magdalene, he tells us why the Eleven apostles were so ready to lend their voices to the bitter denunciation of her: *they were blindly following the lead of Judas Iscariot, the soon-to-be-traitor and betrayer.*

The Eleven didn't come up with those cruel words of condemning Mary's offering. But they were willing to be led by the most notorious apostate of all time, and this within a week of the crucifixion, which they should have been preparing for. They had all the instruction Jesus had been giving them. (But they hadn't been listening.)

Of course, Christ forgave them for following Judas into this disgraceful misjudgment, but for all eternity they will humble their forgiven souls for their blind willingness to follow the traitor in condemning the sacrifice of Christ. (Condemning Mary's deed involves condemning Jesus, as we shall see.)

Who was this lady?

It has been popular through the ages for scholars and theologians to label Mary Magdalene a prostitute. A surprisingly detailed mosaic picture emerges from a study of all that the four Gospel writers say about her, but seems no suggestion there that she was a prostitute. Instead, her problem was some kind of sin that landed her in demon possession.

Bible narratives are unabashed in portraying individuals as prostitutes if that's what they were. Nothing is hidden. Mary may seem to have had an even more serious problem than simple prostitution: some scholars believe they see evidence that she was a nymphomaniac, a woman driven out of her reasoning mind by a demon of lust that was apart from a desire for monetary gain.

Sexual demon possession is not a pleasant obsession. Its captives are held fast because the entanglement of sex in our psychic makeup goes down to the primeval roots of our existence. We are beings created in the image of God, "male and female." Sex is not something for jokes; it's a life or death involvement in the profound creative mysteries of God.

And it was not one demon in Mary that called for exorcism; seven swirled about in her soul. The numeral "seven" is not a mere euphemism. Biblical evidence suggests that she was a very intelligent person; and the more intelligent you are, the more demons can inhabit your soul once they get in. This woman was far, far gone.

How could she ever have gotten this way?

God does not create people in such a condition! The mosaic prose pieces in the four Gospels fit together to indicate that the person who initially abused her sexually was Simon the Pharisee (the story as Luke tells it in chapter 7 can mean nothing else, as we shall see[2]). Jerry L. Walls and Joseph R. Dongell analyze a hypothetical example of what happens to an innocent girl who suffers this fate. This is an insightful glimpse into what could well have been the source of Mary Magdalene's problem: "Consider the case of a young girl who is sexually abused by her uncle. The experience is emotionally devastating and contributes significantly to a deep negative self-image, which, among other things, leads her into sexual promiscuity. …She continues to struggle with feelings of guilt and inferiority throughout her life."[3]

Mary's sexual abuse had obviously been foisted on her when she was young and vulnerable. Although her older sister and brother are

[2] I am indebted for this detail to Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, May 9, 1900.
[3] *Why I Am Not a Calvinist*, InterVarsity Press, 2004, p. 208.

prominent in the Bible story, there are no details of a father, who would have been Simon's brother. For some reason, he seems to have dropped out of sight. Contextual flashes in the story suggest that Mary's upbringing and education were supplied by Simon, the prominent church leader who lived in Bethany (a suburb of Jerusalem near the home of Mary's sister Martha and brother Lazarus).

As sometimes happens with uncles and nieces, Simon could have initiated an emotional relationship with Mary. Fatherless, she could have innocently responded to his subtle aggression. Carsten Johnson in his little volume, *The Writing in the Sand, the Part of the Story That You Were Never Told About Mary Magdalene*,[4] suggests that she became pregnant. If so, Uncle Simon would have desperately wanted to exile her as soon as possible, lest his holy and reverend reputation be sullied by gossip that was unmistakably real. Mary's journey away would have been embittered by the deepest resentments any young woman can know.

The popular view that identifies her with the woman taken in adultery in John 8:1-11 seems to lack a Biblical hint of support. Mary's problem was demon possession, not adultery. As a Jewish young woman of an excellent family receiving devout early training with siblings Martha and Lazarus, she would unlikely have gone into either prostitution or adultery. Even so, the context can't fit. The woman of John 8 was in Jerusalem, and Mary's problems occurred in Magdala, far north in Galilee.

Very likely, when we consider human nature, it seems reasonable that Mary would go to Magdala just to bury herself in shame. She took a nosedive into the darkness of despair. The "nuthin' goin' nowhere" philosophy could well have been hers. Dark as hell despair with corresponding unbelief became the setting for multiple devil possession.

Further, the timing of the story of the adulterous woman of John 8 is set near the end of Christ's ministry, close to its denouement when contention with the nation's leaders foretold His coming crucifixion. But Mary's problem became evident long before, during Christ's First Missionary Journey, because her deliverance occurred either then or shortly after. We find she accompanied the group on their Second

[4] New York: Vantage Press, 1984.

Missionary Journey. Mary's identity hardly fits either a Jerusalem prostitute or adulteress.

Uncle Simon was a very prominent, well-respected religious leader. There must be no story of any improper relationship with Mary leaked to the media of the day. Always taught to respect the elders and patriarchal heads of the family, Mary subjected herself to be meek and to be trodden underfoot, her self-respect gone, and her emotional foundations shattered. As frustration and hopelessness settled in on her soul, she harbored so much bitter hatred in her heart that she became distraught emotionally. When her intellectual acumen was joined with emotional despair, there was a recipe for a brilliant kind of devil possession. "Seven" would describe it well.

If she had been totally bereft of self-respect (a heart condition such devil possession would produce), other men as well could have abused her (Roman soldiers were in Galilee). Her hatred toward men in general only would go deeper and become more bitter. Thus it wouldn't be long before she became a human soul inhabited by these agents of ancient darkness. When the Bible insists on "seven," it implies that she was beyond anyone's therapeutic help.

But it became her good fortune to meet Someone who knew how to help, Someone who can help us, too.

Chapter 2: How Mary Met Jesus

Perhaps brother Lazarus or sister Martha had arranged the contact. Never had she met a man remotely like Him. Artists and novelists through the ages have run wild imagining a sexual attraction between Mary and Jesus, but the Bible doesn't hint of such.

Jesus knew Himself to be the Son of God, but He was also the Son of man, totally human, "in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). His humanity was constantly on display. But there has never been a woman on Planet Earth so beautiful and charming that she could aspire to become the bride of the incarnate Son of God. He was already "in love," "engaged" if you please, with what the Bible speaks of as

some other "woman," His pure church-to-be. His nuptial love was already directed there. The church, in a corporate sense, will eventually be "the Lamb's wife" for whom He has had to wait long until she will "make herself ready."

Meanwhile, in His incarnation, no woman could take her place. No lesser love could have appealed to Jesus! Those who write these novels and movies don't understand the character of Jesus or the nature of true love. When you're already in love, no other *can* intrude (which is why adultery is impossible for anyone who is in love!). The Son of God has always loved His spouse-to-be.

In His incarnation, Jesus had too much true love in His heart, known as *agape*, ever to have given any woman the slightest encouragement to think of Him romantically-tempted, although the Bible says He may have been. It was terrible enough for Him to let His innocent mother watch Him be crucified; how could He have let any other woman be so tortured, even if we allow Him all the humanity which He possessed?

Scripture singles out Mary His mother as the only woman of history whose soul had to be "pierced through by a sword" as old Simeon told her in the temple (Luke 2:34, 35; the Greek says it was to be *romphaia*, the great sword of Goliath). Jesus would spare any other woman from sharing His own mother's soul torture!

But Jesus loved Mary Magdalene, that's for sure, the same as He loved any other human soul. It was with an unselfish, pure, self-sacrificing love. Having been "made in the likeness of men" (Philippians 2:7) and as alone "He knew what was in man" (John 2:25), He understood Mary as no other human being ever had. He understood the labyrinthine complexities of her female human nature, in particular the abused nature of her soul. Himself man's Creator and Redeemer, He knew as no other man how she felt toward men.

In even such a casual contact, Jesus would convey in some way to each human soul He met a sense of self-sacrificing *agape* love. If that soul would open the heart to "behold" it, a certain measure of reciprocity would immediately be initiated. The recognition would at first be beyond words, for "deep calleth unto deep" when one's "soul is cast down," as

was hers.[5] It was not an instinctive response on her part, but one far deeper than that, for Jesus said, "My sheep hear My voice…and they follow Me" (John 10:27). *Mary heard the Voice*, however faint its echo may have been in her darkened and deafened soul. We read that "*agape* never faileth" (see 1 Cor. 13:8). Evidently, even in demon possessed souls that are honest, the capacity to sense *agape* also "never faileth."

In the hidden stratum of her consciousness, Mary began to sense the divine implications of an unearthly love that drove Him at last to His cross. *That was what won her soul.* There was recognition there, on her part, if only a millivolt in strength. It had seemed to her an utter impossibility that there could be any man on earth who *could* love with purity, that is, genuinely. But this One did. The last spark of soul that lingered alive in her heart was awakened. *She wanted what He had*, something infinitely beyond sex or human companionship.

A lesson from Jesus' prayers

If ever you are tempted to wonder why you must pray and pray again, and then pray again, for someone's conversion (or even for your own!), take heart from this story of Mary Magdalene. Even Jesus, the divine Son of God, "the Savior of the world," had to pray "seven times" before Mary was delivered. Her case was a difficult one (and so is every lost soul's, including yours and mine).

Nothing in the Bible story suggests that this prayer season was on one occasion only. A wise writer tells us that "seven times she had heard His rebuke of the demons that controlled her heart and mind."[6] Demons don't give up easily, especially sexual ones. Whatever the nature of her lust, Mary found only temporary relief with the expulsion of the first demon; but her confidence was initiated. She began to see some hope. Little flowers as at springtime after a hard winter began to blossom in her mind and heart. Yes, she could become a woman of self-respect again!

But then when temptation assailed her, she fell. And nothing hurts so badly as to fall after you think you have been delivered. In her renewed

[5] Psalm 42:7.

[6] Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 568.

despair, Mary could have offered the Psalmist's prayer, "Thou hast lifted me up and cast me down" (Psalm 102:10). But Jesus prayed for her again, and again she was delivered. A second demon cast out!

It's hard to imagine (unless you have yourself been through battles with addiction) that this went on seven times! You can just hear Judas Iscariot and the disciples telling Jesus that this woman is hopelessly gone. "You can't save everybody; she's had it! You're making a fool of Yourself to pray for her again!" But a seventh time He prayed for this lost soul.

We are not wise enough to know who that seventh devil was that was finally cast out. But from limited pastoral experience, one would suggest that very likely it was the bitter resentment that Mary had harbored all these years against the man who had ruined her life, against the one who had trampled on her soul and selfishly climbed up his career over the wreckage of her life.

But when she could bring herself to forgive *him*, to repent in a corporate sense in *his* behalf, to realize that as a member of the human race she too had "sinned and come short of the glory of God," (Rom. 3:23) and when she could sense that she had no right-eousness of her own but it was all 100% imputed from Christ, then a new light began to dawn on her. Nothing would have been possible unless she could have come to sense that *his sin would have been her sin but for the grace of a Savior.* Then she discovered how the impossible task before her had become possible: *she forgave him*.

Now at last she was free!

The seventh and last devil was gone. Now she was singing, "[My] soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and [I am] escaped" (Psalm 124:7). There was no thought of performing an act of penance. That little millivolt of sensing *agape* had developed into a lightning surge of heart appreciation for it. She had escaped from hell itself! Like Christian and Hopeful escaping from Giant Despair's dark dungeon when they looked with tears on the bodies of others just as worthy who had perished there in unbelief, she knew only tears of humble but grateful contrition.

Her conversion was not a program of works. *All she did was to appreciate what she saw in Jesus*. Her faith was proven to be genuine because it immediately went to work, as we shall see.

Chapter 3: How Can Mary Say "Thank You"?

She had already been to hell and come back. The bitterness she had drunk was terrible.

The Bible does not tell us of any other person who has suffered the torments of seven demons or felt so "forsaken" of God (the Grand Exception, of course, being the Savior on His cross who cried out, "My God, why have You forsaken Me?").

In her lost condition, as far as humanly possible, Mary had plumbed the depths of the horror that will eventually face those who choose to suffer the second death with Satan.[7] To walk out of that dark cave into the sunlight of God's love filled her soul with a happiness no one can describe. (We could all share that joy if only we could appreciate the darkness of the cave where we *would* be – but for the grace of Christ!)

Mary had to say "Thank You!" somehow, and wanted to say it out loud. But how could she? She had everything against her. For one thing, she was a woman; "keep still in public" was the rule. For another, she had lost the last vestige of her reputation. It seems further that she was not gifted with making speeches; at least none from her has survived. (She did end up being a great preacher, but not with wisdom of words.)

Again, by piecing together little mosaic fragments supplied by the four Gospels, we find that she had caught a unique idea. She had heard something the Twelve were too dense to catch (women *do* have a sixth sense, we are told). Jesus had repeatedly said He was going to *die* at Jerusalem. The Twelve would hear nothing of it. If He was going to die, Mary thought, she could at least anoint His dead body with some precious ointment.

[7] The Bible teaches two kinds of death: the second which is "the wages of sin" in the final lake of fire (Revelation 20:14); and the "sleep" which all humanity suffer at the end of their sojourn on earth (see 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17).

Three of the Gospels emphasize that whatever kind she found was "very expensive." The expert at finance, Judas Iscariot, evaluated it at "more than three hundred denarii," silver coins – the equivalent of a working man's wage for an entire year.[8] If the apothecary had any of lesser value "on sale," she refused it. What she purchased was fit for the emperor, or at least his excellency, Governor Pilate. It was known as "spikenard," imported from the far away Himalayas of northern India, produced from the roots of a special plant found only there.

Clutching the precious alabaster flask, Mary apparently went home and laid it away to await the sad day when it would be needed. She must be patient (we read that *agape* always makes its possessor patient).

Simon comes into the spotlight

Though apparently heartless and cruel in exiling Mary, Simon was still a human being. Humanity at length had to catch up with his ecclesiastical ambitions. His conscience couldn't help but be burdened with guilt; he had ruined a woman's life. In a sense, her blood was on his hands.

He could relate with David who wrote Psalm 32 after he had murdered Uriah the Hittite and stole his wife. The psalm torments Simon's soul: "Day and night Thy hand was heavy upon me" (Psalm 32:4). The scene of Mary's tears of devastation as he commanded her to leave had to be on his mind night and day, especially at night.

Guilt drives a person to those sleepless nights and anxious days, and there is no way to assuage it. He could have been a great guy at the office, all smiles and back-slapping with his cronies by day, but at night he was alone in the dark with the Holy Spirit's probing conviction.

It often happens when one carries unresolved guilt, the weakest organ of one's body breaks down in sickness. In Simon's case, a dread disease fastened on him. To his horror, he was diagnosed with leprosy, which meant now *he* had to leave home. He would have been more than human if he did not imagine that a severe Deity was paying him back for how he treated Mary.

[8] Matthew 20:1, 2.

I am indebted to a thoughtful author for an intimate glimpse: Simon met Jesus somewhere, and "piteously implored Him" to heal him of his leprosy.[9] Apparently Jesus has responded with grace, exacting no promise or even commitment on Simon's part – which was usual for Jesus. All of His healings were done with New Covenant grace. Simon returned home happy, but perhaps not too grateful. But he was a decent sort of man. He had been healed of a horrible disease; he must say "Thank You" somehow.

But how could he?

Being a macho man whose eyes were never dimmed with tears, he could not do as Mary was to do when she fell on her knees with tears before her Savior. Simon was a man among men, no sentimentality for him. Millions of men wish they knew how to shed a tear. Taught from babyhood to repress the natural impulses of humanity, they become cold in heart. Simon was captive to his heart coldness, and he is the strictest devotee of a works program.

But he finally decided what he could do: he would throw a banquet and invite Jesus and His disciples to come (see Mark 14:3-5). This undoubtedly took some courage, for it was only a few days until the crucifixion, and Pharisee sentiment in town was strongly anti-Jesus. He wouldn't have to say anything embarrassing; his hospitable largesse would silently accomplish the deed. Problem solved.

Human nature being what it is, it was unlikely that he would put Mary on the guest list. In fact, Luke tells us that she learned about the gala event independently of an invite from Simon (Luke 7:37).

When she did learn of it, she thought of a better idea than to waste ointment on the Savior's dead body: why not anoint Him while He is still living? She understood the dear Bible teaching that "the dead know not anything," that they are unconscious in death.[10] Clutching her precious alabaster flask, she made her way to the banquet and, in effect, "crashed the gate."

[9] Ellen G. White, *Spirit of Prophecy*, vol. 2, p. 380.
[10] Ecclesiastes 9:5

Finding Jesus, she stood behind where He reclined. All that pent up gratitude for saving her from hell burst loose in an unpremeditated torrent of tears as she knelt before Jesus. Luke tells the story:

> "Then one of the Pharisees asked Him to eat with him. And He went to the Pharisee's house, and sat down to eat.
>
> "And behold, a woman in the city who was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at the table in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster flask of fragrant oil, and stood at His feet behind Him weeping, and she began to wash His feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head; and she kissed His feet and anointed them with the fragrant oil.
>
> "Now when the Pharisee who had invited Him saw this, he spoke to himself, saying, 'This man, if He were a prophet, would know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner'" (Luke 7:36-39, NKJV).

I have often wondered what I would have done at this juncture if I had been Jesus. He knew the full story of Simon's escapade with Mary. Should Jesus give up on Simon and call it a day? Saving Mary was a good day's work; why not go home and rest? I think I would have said to the host, "Thank you, Simon, for inviting Me. Nice dinner, but I have another appointment. I'll skip the dessert. Goodbye." I would have reasoned to myself, "Let this critic rot."

But Jesus had love for poor Simon, too. If Mary's case was difficult, Simon's was more so. She had been bothered by "seven devils," but he had an eighth as well. His soul was barricaded, armored by a pride that Revelation describes as a wall of resistance – the most nearly hopeless heart-affliction His church has ever known – lukewarmness.

Entrenched in this same "rich and increased with goods" state that seems to permeate the last of the seven churches of Revelation 2 and 3, Simon was almost impervious to the melting influence of the Holy Spirit. This semi-hardness of heart is the most challenging state of "lostness" that God has had to deal with in His professed people during all human ages. Simon was all but unreachable, as prophecy says of "the angel of the church of the Laodiceans." Almost nothing can reach such hearts.

What *could* Jesus do for him?

Here in the narrative is an exquisite example of what was a daily experience for Jesus. In a brilliant insight into His secret personal life, Isaiah describes His daily morning devotionals:

> "He [the Lord God] awakens Me morning by morning, He awakens My ear, to hear as the learned. The Lord God has opened My ear, and I was not rebellious, nor did I turn away" (Isaiah 50:4, 5, NKJV).

Peterson renders it vividly:

> "The Master, God, has given Me a well-taught tongue, so I know how to encourage tired people. He wakes me up in the morning…and I didn't go back to sleep, didn't pull the covers back over My head" (Ibid, *The Message*).

Jesus must have prayed earnestly that very morning for the Father to teach Him what to say in whatever problem might come up that day. (We have the same opportunity to learn "morning by morning"!)

The Holy Spirit flashed into the mind of Jesus a story that could save Simon from himself, and save us too if we can grasp the point. It was a response to Simon's self-congratulatory musing:

> "And Jesus answered and said to him, 'Simon, I have something to say to you.' And he said, 'Teacher, say it.'
>
> "'There was a certain creditor who had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing with which to repay, he freely forgave them both. Tell Me, therefore, which of them will love him more?'
>
> "Simon answered and said, 'I suppose the one whom he forgave more.' And He said to him, 'You have rightly judged'" (Luke 7:40-43, *The Message*).

Simon would surely be intelligent enough to get the point immediately. The woman whom he despised was the one who owed the fifty silver coins; the five hundred debt was on him.

Jesus could have let him off the hook with that, and he would have been blessed with a realization of his true guilt. But the Savior chose to press the thorn in deeply:

> "Then He [Jesus] turned to the woman and said to Simon [with His back turned on him!], 'Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for My feet, but she has washed My feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head'" (Ibid, verse 44).

Simon must have blushed. But the thorn goes in still deeper:

> "'You gave Me no kiss, but this woman has not ceased to kiss My feet since the time I came in'" (Ibid, verse 45).

By now Simon is probably crimson. But there is more to come:

> "'You did not anoint My head with [common] oil, but this woman has anointed My feet with fragrant oil'" (Ibid, verse 46).

Everyone heard every word. Simon would probably have loved to drop through the floor. Then Jesus speaks the formula that Simon desperately needed to learn, and that God's "lukewarm" people are perishing to understand today if they don't want to remain lukewarm for another century or more:

> "'Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little'" (Ibid, verse 47).

There's something profound here about learning the most difficult task that any of us needs to learn: *how to love*. Could it be easy once we grasp this formula Jesus teaches?

But what happened to Mary?

At the end of this colloquy with Simon, His back still turned to the Pharisee but addressing Mary, Jesus said to her:

> "'Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace'" (Ibid, verse 50, KJV).

This raises the question: what is faith? It saved Mary, lost as she was. Evidently Jesus intends that her experience will illuminate for us what its true definition can be.

Chapter 4: "What is Faith?" Jesus Answers

At the party, Jesus had told Mary to "go in peace, thy faith hath saved thee." She had a precious possession: genuine "faith." But what is it?

The Chinese have said that a picture is worth a thousand words. Faith is the *sine qua non* of true Christian experience. Righteousness is only by faith, "not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Ephesians 2:8, 9).

But we must distinguish genuine faith from its counterfeit if we are ever to know peace of heart. Jesus lifts up Mary's heart-response to His delivering her from her "seven devils" as being what the Chinese want: the "picture" of faith. Mary's story makes it easy for us to understand. The picture's worth more than many thousands of words.

To state that definition simply, faith is a heart-appreciation of the *agape* love that led the Son of God to die for us on His cross. That faith is what Mary had.

From her first contact with the Savior, she had begun opening her heart for the Holy Spirit to "pour" in that *agape*. She couldn't receive much at first, but day by day her capacity began to grow.

In His first contact with her in Magdala, Jesus gave expression to that *agape*, perhaps not in words, but in look, in touch, in spirit, in the fervency of His prayer for her deliverance. She was almost totally gone, but a tiny remnant of soul was still within her that responded with that tiny spark of appreciation. Thereafter, with each succeeding prayer during the following six sessions, her appreciation of His *agape* grew.

What motivated her thereafter was not fear of hell, not hope of reward, not love of heaven, not desire for praise from others, but a totally non-egocentric appreciation for "the width and length and depth and height – and to know the love [*agape*] of Christ which passes knowledge" (Ephesians 3:18, 19).

She experienced the reality of the delightful process stated in Romans 5:5:

> "Hope does not disappoint, because the love [*agape*] of Christ has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us."

Starting with an empty heart, the *agape* fills it like you fill a wine jug!

And once the heart is filled, it all flows to others as easily and naturally as it flowed in from the heart of Jesus. It's not that you try and try to *behave* like Jesus; "behold," see, comprehend, the reality that was in His heart; sense what it cost Him to save you; then the same behavior flows out from your own heart. Like watching a game at the arena, we behold this drama unfold unconsciously in Mary. She is a demonstration of how a sinner is saved.

The link between the love of Christ and the faith of Mary

When she broke the alabaster flask of precious ointment to anoint Jesus, she was giving a lesson to the world. She showed that same spirit of sacrifice which Jesus' life and death exemplified. Mary's act has special meaning for us as an illustration of what led Him to His cross.

Her act at Bethany stands out alone in history as the most beautiful, heart-touching deed ever performed by a repentant sinner. It was closely involved with the outworking of the great controversy between Christ and Satan because it was welcome evidence to Jesus and to the watching universe that Satan's grand contention was wrong: *humanity is indeed capable of attaining a heart-appreciation of the sacrifice Jesus made.*

Mary had no righteousness of her own; but her Savior's righteousness had been *imparted* to her, to become now an integral element of her character. She welcomed it. It was not merely legally *imputed*; it had found *lodging* in her soul. As Job long before had proved Satan wrong when he demonstrated that someone could serve God for no reward, so now Mary makes a magnificent demonstration, but not realizing her role.

She demonstrates the power implicit in a commitment. She burns all bridges behind her; from now on she has given herself to the Savior, everything laid on the altar of Christ. Paul said, "For me to live is Christ"

(Philippians 1:21). Henceforth she has no problem with "obedience." It's not just outward acts; *it's heart*.

Did she help Jesus?

Imagine how her noble deed cheered the heart of the Savior in His darkest hours when He hung on His cross! No angel from heaven could have brought Him the comfort which the memory of her tearful sacrifice gave Him. In her sacrificial faith directed to Him, He discerned a pledge of His eventual joy. The travail of His soul will purchase for Him a precious reward – the making of *many* righteous through "faith which works by love" (Galatians 5:6; Isaiah 53:11).

Christ's death on the cross satisfied the legal demands of the atonement. Fine. Theologians can wrangle over it endlessly. But the evoking of such repentant love *in human hearts* is what changes lives. It gives the Savior a reward for His expenditure of Himself.

A debt to Christ and a debt to this woman!

The world may owe something to Mary which it has never recognized. She encouraged the sorely tempted One in His time of greatest need. The cold-hearted Twelve gave Him no such comfort as did Mary, whom they had despised for her extravagant offering.

Mary could not know why she had been moved to make it. She was informed only by some inscrutable yet infallible reason of *agape*. She had spent her all to buy this ointment. What really happened was that she anointed Christ's body "beforehand" for the burial. And He appreciated it to the full!

She was so completely unable to defend her action before the reproachful disciples that Jesus Himself had to step in and rescue her. In undertaking her defense, He transformed the incident into a lesson on the meaning of the cross.

In fact, from what He said, it does seem that a sympathetic appreciation of Mary's profoundly moving deed *is* necessary if we would understand the gospel itself. He bespoke for her act the high regard of His followers in all ages: "Wherever this gospel is preached throughout the whole world,

what this woman did will also be spoken of as a memorial to her." Infinitely better than any marble inscription for a Roman emperor!

Here is reason enough for giving Mary our attention.

But why did Jesus praise her so extravagantly?

Was He as unbalanced as she appeared to be? Could He not have been more restrained and conservative in His remarks? Wise people are generally not so enthusiastic.

It's for the sake of "this gospel" that the fragrance of her deed is to be published abroad, as Jesus says. Here is the key to what is perplexing here. *Mary was preaching a sermon*. Jesus' extravagant love demanded an extravagant response, and therefore Jesus *must* defend her. He must defend His cross! He saw reason enough:

- Her act illuminates the gospel and casts into sharp relief its principles of love, sacrifice, and magnificence.
- The faultfinding of the disciples exposes our natural human hardness of heart in reaction to the love revealed there.
- Had we been present on this occasion, we would have found it difficult not to take our stand with Judas Iscariot. He talked such reasonable common sense! Probably many church boards and conference committees would have said "amen!" to his sound fiscal judgment.

Mary had done something that was to all human appearance irrational and wasteful. If "three hundred denarii," the value of the ointment, represented the wages of a laboring man for a full year ("a denarius a day" being the usual pay, Matthew 20:2), such a sum would probably have been enough to provide a meal for five thousand men "besides women and children," according to Philip's cautious estimate. And it could have helped many poor families (see John 6:7 and Matthew 14:21). Why didn't Jesus go for this complaint?

If we did not know the outcome of this drama of Bethany, what would we have thought of this senseless extravagance? Who among us would not have sympathized with the disciples in their feelings of outrage? This emotionally disturbed woman deserves rebuke! "Why was not this fragrant oil sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?"

But Jesus Himself defends Mary

We could ask, "Lord, would it not be a more sober, practical act of devotion for her to use a few drops to anoint Your head, and then sell the balance for our charity fund? Why do You take up for her so fully?"

We may thank Him that such zealots as Mary are only a small minority in the church today. It *is* perplexing, this apparently reckless extravagance on the part of Jesus.

He might have said something nice to her, tenderly commending the warmth of her affection while gently deploring this extravagance in expressing it. He could have kindly encouraged her and at the same time placated the justifiable indignation of His Twelve. That's what any wise pastor would try to do in keeping his church board together!

Not so with Jesus! The hapless penitent tries to escape unnoticed, overwhelmed with confusion and embarrassment, fearing that sister Martha, brother Lazarus and possibly even Jesus will think her foolish and improvident. But His words catch her and hold her. He lifts His voice above the murmuring of the disciples: "Let her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a good work for Me" (the word "good" is *kalos* in the Greek, meaning 'precisely,' 'exactly right').

Far from approving the disciples' apparent regard for the poor, He places a different interpretation on Mary's motive, and it turns out to be a far truer charity. Her deed was a vehicle for proclaiming the gospel. He was, in fact, imparting to her deed a symbolic meaning, and she herself was ignorant of it:

- In the alabaster flask, broken at His feet, He discerned His body, bruised and broken for us.
- In the precious ointment running to waste on the floor, He saw His blood "shed for many for the remission of sins," yet rejected and despised by most of earth's people.
- In the motive that prompted Mary's act – her heartbroken, repentant appreciation for His sacrifice – Jesus saw the true reflection of His love for us.

- In her sacrifice to purchase the ointment with what must have been the sum total of hard-earned savings,[11] He saw the utter emptying of Himself in the role of the divine Love of our souls.
- In her apparent extravagance, He saw the magnificence of Heaven's offering poured out sufficient to save a whole world, yet appreciated by only a handful of its inhabitants.

Jesus was obliged to defend His wondrous cross before those who should have had hearts to appreciate its unutterable worth!

Pathetically, we see ourselves in the cold-hearted Simon and the Twelve

Judas had only sneers of contempt for this reflection of the purest and holiest love eternity had known; and the disciples could only follow the promptings of his selfish criticism. Dare we think ourselves holier than they?

We do well to remember that Mary was informed by the mysterious promptings of the Holy Spirit. He stoops to give no reason. Only in a broken and a contrite heart can that inspiration find entrance.

The disciples were conscious of no such promptings, yet they had privately received teachings about Jesus' approaching death that Mary likely had not clearly heard. They should have had preparatory understanding. But now an untaught woman preached a *sermon* on the cross more eloquent even than Peter's at Pentecost. To this day it thrills the hearts of those who ponder it.

Now we see that acquaintance with the historical details of the crucifixion is nothing compared with a heart that appreciates it. If flesh and blood cannot understand the doctrine of Christ's *person*, as the Savior said at Caesarea Philippi,[12] neither can flesh and blood understand the doctrine of *the cross*.

[11] It seems inappropriate to think of her 300 silver coins as a prostitute's wages! (See Deuteronomy 12:18.)
[12] Matthew 16:17

Chapter 5: How Mary's Deed Illustrates Christ's Sacrifice for Us

Consider the *motive* that prompted Mary. It was not a hope of reward or even desire for praise, that she did this. She wanted to be unnoticed. Only the sudden fragrance that filled the room betrayed her. Faith working by love alone was her guiding principle, and that in turn was a reflection of Jesus' love for sinners.

What was the motive that led Him to His cross? Theologians may write their ponderous tomes trying to account for the strange act at Calvary, only to return, weary at last to realize that no reason can be given except *agape*.

How encouraging to Jesus to see reflected in Mary the image of His own character! "In a sinner?" do you ask. Yes, in "a woman…who *was* a sinner" (Luke 7:37) and a grievous one at that, He saw Himself reflected. As a positive print of a photograph comes from a negative, He saw in her love the print or likeness of His own pattern-love. "Reproach has broken My heart," He cries (Psalm 69:20); repentance has now broken *her* heart through the ministry of His own broken heart. Hers has become a likeness of His.

Heavenly angels, sing your songs of triumph! The plan of salvation is proven to be a success! A great milestone has been passed. So far as the cold-hearted Twelve are concerned, the risk God took at Calvary may not yet seem justified, but it is a success for this woman of Bethany. That means it will be a success for many! The sacrifice of God in Christ has drawn from her soul its complementary sacrifice: "a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart." Fortunately, God is different from the disciples; He will "not despise" it (Psalm 51:17).

Consider the *sacrifice* of Mary's deed

It shines brightest when compared with the sacrifice of Jesus' offering for us. In commending her, He said, "She has done what she could." He too has done all that He could.

If Mary was ever rewarded in a temporal way for what she spent for the purchase of that ointment, we don't know. But may He who emptied Himself, "humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the

death of the cross" (Philippians 2:8), may He find ample reward for *His* sacrifice! We have no alabaster flask of ointment to break upon His feet, but can we at least find tears with which to wash them? Lord, can You not find in us "seven devils" to cast out that we might learn to love as Mary did!

The *magnificence* of Mary's deed shines brightest when likened to that of Jesus' sacrifice

The disciples' reasoning was, Why this extravagance with something so precious? It's running to waste on the floor! Three hundred silver coins down the drain! We love Jesus, too, but just a few drops on His head would have been enough, Mary.

So we would have reasoned!

To this day, the human heart is unable to appreciate the magnificence of Calvary's sacrifice, unless the Holy Spirit can somehow get through to us.

- Why give the divine life "a ransom for many" when only a few will respond?
- Why pour out a Niagara of self-sacrificing love when all but a trickle seemingly is wasted?
- His sacrifice was sufficient to redeem all of earth's billions of sinners; why pay such a price when the ultimate returns will be so meager?
- Why should His divine Form be racked with grief and tears over "Jerusalems" that don't know and don't care for their "day of their visitation"?
- Why not restrict the love and its expression to the few who will respond rather than pour out such an infinite waste that seems so useless?[13]

This is how the disciples reasoned about Mary's magnificence; and many think today the same way concerning Him of whom her love was but a type.

To answer we can only say that love is never genuine unless it *is* prodigal. Love never stints, never calculates. Mary's "very precious" alabaster flask

[13] This reasoning is held by many Christians today who adhere to strict Calvinistic predeterminism. They understand that Christ died only for the elect.

of ointment was not bought at a bargain sale; she paid the full price for the finest that could be purchased with no grudging thought of economy.

One can imagine her visiting the shopkeeper. Seeing in her only a poor peasant, he suggests a cheap preparation. “Have you nothing better?” she asks.

“Yes, but it will cost you two hundred denarii.”

“Do you have anything still better than this?” she persists.

“I have the very finest and most expensive, but it will cost three hundred. You can’t afford that, Mary; it’s only for a governor or emperor!”

“Let me have it,” she replies. With her motive of faith working by love, she can do nothing less.

Could God, who is Himself love, do less than His utmost? He never thought of how to save the redeemed at the least possible cost to Himself. Heaven, the “ivory palaces,” the devotion of a myriad of angels, the thrones of an infinite universe, life eternal, yes, the precious companionship of the Father – *all* Christ freely spent in giving Himself. An ocean of the water of life expended lavishly, and the only returns a few fragile earthen vessels filled with human tears of faith and love! How infinitely precious must those “bottles” (Psalm 56:8) be to Him!

> “O Israel, hope in the Lord: for with the Lord there is mercy, and with Him is *abundant* redemption” (Psalm 130:7).

Simon the leper’s cold reaction to Mary’s deed disturbs us.

Our host has been a silent witness to Mary’s act of devotion. He seems not to be concerned with its extravagance as are the Twelve. Darker surmisings even than those are coursing through his soul, honest and practical as he may be.

He has not yet believed that Jesus is the Savior, though he has hoped that He might indeed prove Himself to be the Messiah. Having experienced the thrill of a miraculous healing from leprosy, he has condescended now to invite the Galilean and His poor followers to this social occasion so he can express his gratitude. In so doing, he avoids giving Jesus the honor of recognition as a social equal.

Watching the sublime spectacle of a repentant sinner wiping the tearstained feet of the world's Savior with her hair, Simon reasons darkly within himself, "This Man, if He were a prophet, would know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him: for she is a sinner" (Luke 7:39). How little does the self-righteous heart discern the credentials of heaven!

In the parable He used to enlighten poor Simon, Jesus reveals the lesson of the cross that enlightens every honest heart that will pause to survey it: *you love in proportion as you sense you have been forgiven.*

You are only a small sinner? Okay, you are doomed to love little.

Simon having been the instrument in leading Mary into sin originally was clearly the debtor owing five hundred silver coins. By contrasting Simon's cold-hearted lovelessness with the warm devotion of Mary, Jesus tactfully revealed to his darkened mind the truly astounding realization: Mary's repentant love should have been his *if the one forgiven most should love most.*

The light even now shining from the cross illumined Simon's heart and disclosed to him the almost hopeless sinner that he was. The infinite pity of Jesus saved him from an ultimate ruin greater than Mary's would have been. Simon could have also sung Wesley's hymn, "Jesus, Lover of My Soul," as Mary could.

Beware of misunderstanding

The parable of Jesus was not intended to show that different degrees of obligation should be felt by us different sinners. Both Simon and Mary were infinitely and eternally in debt to the divine Creditor. Mary's love, however, was due to the simple fact that she *knew* she was a sinner and had been forgiven *much*. Simon had been forgiven little because *he felt* he had sinned but little.

Can anyone in God's eternal kingdom go about feeling superior to others? "I never was like the common people! *I* came from a good family and grew up on the right side of the tracks! *My* friends weren't the ordinary drop-outs, living loose, or using drugs. *I* was pretty good on my own, and all I needed was a slight push to get me over the top into the kingdom!"

Wouldn't such words seem more appropriate coming from some whiner outside the City gates than from someone inside?

If Paul could call himself "the chief of sinners," can we do less? What light the cross may shed upon the unfeeling heart of Laodicea, the last of the great seven churches of history! Lukewarm, self-righteous saints will trail behind the publicans and harlots who, like Mary, will gladly repent when they hear the last message of mercy. "Many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first" (Matthew 19:30).

Chapter 6: The "Works" That Mary's Faith Did

If we realize that our worldly hearts are cold, if no tears of gratitude ever well up in our eyes, should we go out and give ourselves to the devil and repeat Mary's plunge so we can learn how to "love much"? No, for we might never find our way back as she did. But there's a better way to learn how to "love much."

(a) Realize, (b) see, (c) behold, (d) grasp, how your true guilt is greater than you have imagined it to be. *See* – how you sit side by side with Simon owing "five hundred silver coins," not a mere fifty. *Think about what you would be* if Jesus had not already "saved" you from your true potential.

I remember watching a documentary on Nazism. If I had been a German boy growing up under Hitler, surrounded with that insistent propaganda, taught to obey orders whether or not, faithful in a patriotic way, what could I have become? When I was born, I had no built-in defense that would have made me more righteous!

The New English Bible correctly renders our familiar text that may leave us feeling a little smug and self-satisfied. Romans 3:23 usually tells us that we have sinned, well, some: "All have sinned…" But the true rendering is: "All *alike* have sinned." No one of us as humans is *innately* any more righteous than anyone else.

We all have inherited through our genes and chromosomes the same sinful, fallen nature. We were *born* separated from God and thus alienated from righteousness. We were born on our own; we have all had to *learn* about a Savior. We have had to *hear* the gospel – it didn't come as

standard equipment in our genes. If we *never hear* it, there's no telling where we could end up.

Whatever "goodness" we may imagine we possess has been the imputed and imparted gift of Christ's righteousness. If He were to let go of us, we would be helpless, which means we would be powerless to save ourselves from the evil that our sinful nature would prompt us to do and to be.

The sins of someone else, therefore, would be our sins aside from that grace of Christ. They *are* our sins…but for Him! The message of Christ's righteousness makes clear that it is His 100%, not ours by even 1%. But our worldly hearts resent this humbling realization. The Jews in Christ's day resented it; we are as prone today. In honest truth, we are sitting with Simon the Leper.

We owe the full five hundred silver coins

This "formula" that Jesus expressed to Simon ("forgiven much, love much; forgiven little, love little") if understood becomes a truth that will transform a lukewarm church into one throbbing with the life of heaven.

Jesus realized that it would have been just as difficult for Simon to grasp this as it is for us in Laodicea to grasp it now. That's why He knew that He had to come down hard on Simon with devastating logic, so he could see his true condition. The "formula" ("forgiven much/love much") for want of a better word has been described as "corporate guilt" and "corporate repentance." Corporate guilt is for sins we may not have personally committed, but which we know we *would* have committed if we had met a temptation of sufficient strength, and if we had not had a Savior holding us by the hand.

Someone has wisely said that "the books of heaven record the sins that would have been committed had there been opportunity."[14] You may cry in distress, "There's no end to my guilt! Then there's no hope for me!" But there was hope for Mary – delivered from her seven devils; there was hope for Simon – from his eighth. And let us remember: if the dimensions

[14] Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, July 31, 1901.

of our true corporate guilt are as wide as the whole world that crucified the Son of God, there is also the infinite righteousness of Christ that He longs to impute and impart to us. He forgave those who crucified Him – *we* are the ones who did it. We are forgiven!

There is no biblical hint that Jesus' self-sacrificing labor for Simon's soul was in vain; the Pharisee's heart was touched. Undoubtedly, he became a converted follower of Jesus. Christ's morning prayer that day was answered!

And before Jesus died, in Simon converted He saw a prophecy of Laodicea converted! Hang on by faith; there is hope for her. The church can be healed.

Chapter 7: Mary Magdalene and Those Strange "144,000"

Mary seems displaced in history. Jesus praised her with His most enthusiastic endorsement ("she hath done what she could," meaning, she has done *all she could*). Now comes this strange group of people who also get the highest praise in history when it is said that they "follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth… In their mouth [is] found no guile: for they are *without fault*" (Revelation 14:4, 5). Pretty high résumés! Not duplicated in history.

Mary seems to have found closer fellowship with this strange group than she found among the Twelve. And it's not until the end of time that we see this demonstration of the long-awaited "firstfruits unto God and to the Lamb" in the appearance of this mysterious group.

If Jesus also commended Mary so highly, it would seem that her entry into history should have been delayed until that special last-days group arrives. That's where she deserves fellowship more than among the Twelve. But there's a reason why she came when she did, just before Jesus had to die.

This is how the last group is described:

> "After those things I saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that

> the wind should not blow on the earth… And I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God: and he cried with a loud voice to the four angels, to whom it was given to hurt the earth and the sea, saying, Hurt not the earth…till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads. And I heard the number of them which were sealed: …an hundred and forty and four thousand" (Revelation 7:1-4).

A few identifying features seem clear cut:

- They have the "Father's name written in their foreheads" (14:1). They are the same ones who have "the seal of the living God…in their foreheads" (7:1-4).
- They hold a pivotal place in *the end* of human history because their sealing coincides with four angels holding back the ultimate outbreak of human hatreds – a war never known before has been restrained. This seems to pinpoint when the "144,000" as a group come on the world's stage.
- Their being "without fault before the throne of God" inspires the most glorious outbreak of symphonic and choral music ever. "I heard the voice of harpers harping with their harps: and they sung as it were a new song before the throne, and before the four living creatures, and the elders: and no man could learn that song but the hundred and forty and four thousand, which were redeemed from the earth" (14:2, 3). They celebrate a victory that Heaven has been waiting a long time to see.
- They must be the ones of whom Jesus speaks in His message to "the angel of the church of the Laodiceans," special because in a time when overcoming is ridiculed as "perfectionism" they quietly and bravely have "overcome…even as [Christ] also overcame" (3:21). That's a distinction reserved for the last of the seven churches. Mary Magdalene gave the world a glimpse of one person whose faith was a mirror reflection of the faith and *agape* of Jesus; now a multitude demonstrates the same.
- Mary came out of a horrific experience of possession by seven demons, and therefore the quality in her joy of deliverance must be very rare. These "144,000" have an experience that is also rare in world history.

"These are they which came out of *great* tribulation and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (7:14). Their "tribulation" may well be physical distress in blood persecution, as we have usually thought; but that "great tribulation" may also be an excruciatingly severe battle with evil spirits.

- They know a life struggle that draws on one's soul to its depths. Jacob's famous "night of wrestling" was not one of mere physical torture; its mental agony and spiritual dimensions prefigure this final struggle of the "144,000." If no one else can sing their special song, it must mean that no previous *group* in history has ever known the severity of the spiritual battle these will have had.
- Mary's faith was said by Jesus to be unique in history up to that time. Not even Abraham, "the father of the faithful," merited such praise as Jesus gave her. So the "144,000" stand unique at the end of history, singing that new "song before the throne" which no other group is permitted to sing. None have had their unique experience.
- Apparently one has to emerge from a battle with "seven devils" in order to qualify! What generation in history has been confronted with ultimate allurements of Satan's most masterful temptations, other than this generation in which we live today? Only in an era of world terrorism could such a victorious faith meet the ultimate in temptation that would set it in special display.
- Because the "144,000" demonstrate "the firstfruits unto…the Lamb," there seems something almost incredulous that down until the very end of time Jesus has to wait and wait before He can see such "firstfruits" of His great sacrifice.
- What about all those glorious exploits of "by faith" described in Hebrews 11 and in the story of the reformers and martyrs of the past two millennia? Aren't their achievements sufficient for this honor? Must all this vast host step aside, cover their mouths and listen reverently while this special choir of "144,000" sing their piece by themselves? Apparently the answer has to be yes. There has to be a reason.

Whoever this strange group may be and whether their number is literal or symbolic, we dare not try to say. What we know for sure is that their

appearance on the stage is the signal for the conclusion of the longstanding "great controversy between Christ and Satan."

They make possible what Heaven has longed to see ever since the hour when on His cross before He died, Jesus foresaw that someday His sacrifice *would* bear such fruit. Before He can bow His head and die, He must know (as Psalm 22 says) that "the meek *shall* eat and be satisfied; they *shall* praise the Lord that seek Him: *your heart shall live forever.* All the ends of the world *shall* remember and turn unto the LORD; and all the kindreds of the nations *shall* worship before Thee. For the kingdom is the Lord's; and He is the governor among the nations… A seed *shall* serve Him; it shall be accounted to the Lord for a generation" (Psalm 22: 26-31). That "seed" is the demonstration of faith that will light up the universe before the end of the great controversy between Christ and Satan. The angels yearn to see it.

Christ had won the stupendous cosmic victory, but now before He has to die, He must be allowed to look beyond to see *by faith* its end result. It's not that He wanted to reap a grand reward for Himself; He was pouring out His soul unto death, the second death. Like someone choosing to go down on the *Titanic* and give his place on the lifeboat to us, He rejoiced because *our hearts* "shall live forever."

That "generation" that "serves Him" is what He has been waiting for. His ministry in the Most Holy Apartment of His heavenly sanctuary is what emboldens them for the last trial. "The elect" must not be swept away by the final avalanche of the Enemy's barrage of deceptive temptation.

The "144,000" have a special role in this last great drama

Each individual will demonstrate his unique personal victory in overcoming "even as [Christ] overcame." Each one will have his own unique conflict. Apparently Satan will have 144,000 different kinds of temptation designed to appeal to every category of human experience. There are alcoholics, drug addicts, pornographers, sexual aberrants, people who have felt driven to the verge of the suicide cliff, lukewarm church adherents – all are people who have engaged in direct hand-to-hand duels with the Enemy of souls. Their very humanity as having been created "in the image

of God" has withstood the Enemy's effort to destroy it. They have felt a solemn kinship with Mary Magdalene in her spiritual dungeon of despair.

They all will know one common denominator of temptation, yes; but from every widespread divergent culture of the Orient, Africa, Eastern Europe, Malaysia, "they come from the east and west" each having a unique battle individual to themselves, each glorifying Christ in a unique, never-duplicated way.

Even from the depths of the Hollywood culture some must receive the grace to overcome! They too can glorify Christ in a unique way. Revelation guarantees that some even from the Roman curia of the Vatican will step out of their closet and bravely embrace the truth of the gospel when the fourth great angel makes his proclamation (see Revelation 18:1-4 and 15:2, 3).

Mary, your brothers and sisters are coming!

They have all had their battles with seven demons, as you have had your battle with them, and they have all overcome by faith *as you did* – you all sharing together a special fellowship with the Lamb who won His battle on His cross. All have come to appreciate that "breadth, and length, and depth, and height" of the infinite *agape* of Christ. They have at last grown up "unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ," a corporate body of believers prepared to be a bride who "hath made herself ready" for "the marriage of the Lamb." The bride's garments are "the righteousness of saints," the righteousness of Christ[15] imparted to them so that now it has become theirs by faith[16] (see Revelation 19:7, 8). It's to Zion that they come. Isaiah describes this host flocking in during that last universal evangelistic campaign:

> "Lift up thine eyes round about, and see: all they gather themselves together, they come to thee: thy sons shall come from afar, and thy daughters shall be nursed at thy side. Then thou shalt see, and flow together, and thine heart shall fear, and

[15] *Dikaiosune*, Greek.
[16] *Dikaiomata*, Greek.

> be enlarged… The sons of strangers shall build up thy walls, and their kings shall minister unto thee. …Therefore thy gates shall not be shut day nor night… Thy people also shall be all righteous" (Isaiah 60:4-21, KJV).

These almost infinite temptations will target individuals from "every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people" of the last days. To each one "the everlasting gospel" has become uniquely the individual, personal "power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth." Each is an important part of the whole. The great controversy cannot at last be declared a total success until every attack of the Enemy is vanquished. Someone exercising "the faith of Jesus" will demonstrate His power to save from every demonic captivity the world around – shall we say, 144,000 categories? You are important!

The humblest person in his lowly place will have his victory-laden trial that is the fraction of 144,000th of the whole. And there will be "kings" and "princes" too who must bear their part of the final burden. The entire phalanx of believers in their intimate relationship will together stand in their totality as the mirror reflection of the heart of the tempted but victorious Son of God on His cross. Mary has been the prototype, the miniature prophecy of what will be.

It's popular to regard as impossible the prospect of an entire "church" growing spiritually to "overcome even as [Christ] overcame." The idea is often dismissed as "perfectionism." But those who fail to sense the non-egocentric nature of Christ's definition of faith cannot grasp how good this Good News is. Both the world and, it seems, the church are given to self-seeking; even our "righteousness" is ego-oriented. Our definition of faith is egocentric. Our hymns are often permeated with self. Self is the sanctified concern. We seek a "balance" between concern for self and hopefully some concern for Christ, but now "balance" has become our popular lukewarmness – partly hot, partly cold; some love of the world, some love for Christ.

But to be lukewarm will become a thing of the past. It's had its day. The quiet preacher of Bethany has forever outlawed it.

Jesus rejoiced before He drew His last breath

His *agape* had performed its wonders in the one soul redeemed from Magdala. The test case was a success. Mary's Christian experience gave to the Savior that prototype, the assurance He yearned for, before He died. A faith that appreciated His *agape* sacrifice produced *one person* who reflected His character; *a people* from all over the world who can "stand without fault before the throne of God" will do the same. No wonder the crucified Jesus died with His face lighted with a blaze of glory.

The Lord in His great mercy has sent the most precious message to His people that will prepare them to "stand in the great day of God." The message is to swell to a great loud cry that will awaken every human heart to make the final choice to receive or reject it.

Mary's faith inspired by *agape* can teach us the new ways to reach hearts with the everlasting gospel. No committee could have thought up her novel way of proclaiming the message. So will everyone in the Lord's 144,000 categories of saints each make his or her own special contribution to that fourth angel's blessed task of lighting the earth with the glory of the final message. Love will be their teacher.

The lady once possessed by seven devils thought she was useless, but she was important.

So are you.

Mary Magdalene

Mary Magdalene is either a brilliant person who is right on, or she turns out to be a wild fanatic. Those “three hundred denarii” (silver coins) are a fantastic sum which she blew in just a few moments of aromatic bliss at this party. At first thought, it would seem that the “some” who didn’t like what she did were thinking clearly. Jerusalem and its suburbs were full of poor people who could have used the food or clothing that this princely sum could have purchased for them.

But Jesus saves her from a fanatic’s ignominy. He transforms her into a famous lady: never did He speak so highly of any other contemporary person! How could you ask for a higher endorsement under Heaven? This modest book has come into existence as a tiny fruition of that encomium by Jesus – her story must be proclaimed “throughout the whole world.” In fact, the sobering truth dawns on us that maybe we can’t really understand “this gospel” unless we hear and appreciate what the Bible says about this lady!